THE BISHOP OF OXFORD's

SERMON

BEFORE

THE HOUSE OF LORDS,

ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 30, 1787;

BEING

The ANNIVERSARY of the MARTYRDOM of KING CHARLES I.

A

Die Mercurii, 31 *Januarii*, 1787.

ORDERED,

By the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament aſſembled, That the Thanks of this Houſe be, and are hereby given to the Lord Biſhop of OXFORD, for the Sermon by him preached before this Houſe Yeſterday, in the Abby Church, WESTMINSTER; and he is hereby deſired to cauſe the ſame to be forthwith printed and publiſhed.

ASHLEY COWPER.
Cler. Parliamentor.

A

SERMON

694.i.20
2

PREACHED BEFORE

THE HOUSE OF LORDS,

AT THE

ABBY CHURCH, WESTMINSTER,

ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 30, 1787;

BEING

The ANNIVERSARY of the MARTYRDOM of KING CHARLES I.

BY

Butler
JOHN, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR T. CADELL, IN THE STRAND.
MDCCLXXXVII.

SERMON, &c.

PROVERBS, CHAP. XVII. VER. 14.

THE BEGINNINO OF STRIFE IS AS WHEN ONE LETTETH OUT WATER.

THE original words, rendered STRIFE and CONTENTION in this verſe, apply chiefly to private litigations between individuals; but the Wiſe Man's admonition is full as applicable to vehement diſcord between parties in the ſame community, whoſe numbers, as well as the greater importance of the conteſt, muſt proportionably extend or aggravate the evils of ſtrife, and have, in ſome caſes, prolonged the duration of them to the dreadful period of general ruin.

They who live in turbulent times, have ample expeperience of the truth of Solomon's obſervation ſo applied; and it is confirmed more or leſs by the hiſtories of civil wars, whether partially or impartially written. The facts, in which they all agree, ſhew, from the progreſſion and end of

of moſt of thoſe wars, that the beginning of them was like the opening a ſluice, or breaking down a dam; for it brought on calamities rapid, irreſiſtible, and comprehenſively deſtructive.

Some of the various cauſes of ſo terrible and complicated a miſchief may, by ſagacious Writers, be traced back to a remote period, when none of the evils, imputed to them, were apprehended, or could be deſigned. But as ſuch an inveſtigation might be mere hiſtorical curioſity, it would not apply ſo immediately to religious and moral inſtruction, as if we content ourſelves with knowing the known promoters of a violent civil conteſt to be, in moſt, if not all caſes, the human paſſions, which are exerted early on one ſide or both.

Difference of opinion about principles of government, or about public meaſures, or claims of right peaceably aſſerted, are ſo far from falling within the malignant meaning of ſtrife or contention, that it would be opprobrious language to call them by that name. The ſtrife of my text has no tendency to peace or public good, and is never conducted by fair argument.

When the neceſſary ſteps towards public hoſtilities are avowedly taken, the work of ſober diſcuſſion is at once ſuperſeded by the machinations of ambition, or the wild efforts of anger, hatred, and malice. Then ſtrife and

contention

contention are evidently at work; and the land and its inhabitants are ſoon overflowed by the evils, which it is the end of ſociety to prevent.

The firſt breach of UNION, that fundamental principle of ſocial life, is not indeed in every caſe irreparable: Temper and conceſſions may heal it. But though theſe be the obvious remedies, they are ſeldom ſo immediately at hand, as the natural conſequences are of public ſtrife. Law and government may be relaxed, before the minds of men are calm enough to hearken to terms of peace. In the mean time, the ſtability of every houſe may be ſhaken, and a kingdom thus divided againſt itſelf may, before the day of negotiation, be ſo far advanced towards ruin, that it cannot ſtand.

Nor has the courſe of this miſery much chance of relief from TIME, that natural emollient of private animoſities, that friend of man in the common troubles of life. The ſalutary operation of it is obſtructed by the unavoidable effect of a public flame. Mutual provocations contribute a daily ſupply of fuel, and, in ſome caſes, have preſerved the diſcord alive, till the original ſubject of it has been nearly forgotten.

A people ſo agitated by public ſtrife and private reſentments, become gradually licentious in the purſuit of their object. The genuine principles of religion and morality muſt

loſe

loſe their hold of ſuch minds, and indeed are diſcountenanced as uſeleſs. Activity and perſeverance in a cauſe, not neceſſarily connected with religion or morals, perhaps very diſtinct from both, are the only virtue and honour in vogue, and have been often received as a compenſation for great defects in character. It has been moreover obſerved in a nation ſo convulſed, that minds perhaps originally good, or at leaſt inoffenſive, have loſt that horror of guilt, which is naturally felt in peaceable times, and thus become qualified for every extremity to which unbridled paſſions tend.

In addition to all this, hiſtory informs us, that there are evils reſulting from a general ferment of bitter animoſities, which may be quite out of ſight in the beginning of STRIFE. Such, for inſtance, is the contingent acceſſion of inflammatory matter from adventitious parties, no otherwiſe connected with the general diſeaſe, than as that is the harbour of every ill humour; and it muſt happen, that in the natural changes incident in time to all human deſigns, by the death or verſatility of the conductors, men of the pureſt intention may be diſappointed, in ſeeing a cauſe, originally good, devolve into bad hands.

In the mean time, the wiſeſt and beſt men, qualified to ſave their country in this extreme diſtreſs, by the authority annexed to ſuperior underſtanding and probity, are driven by the times into obſcurity, the only ſhelter from diſcord, hypocriſy, and all the ſucceſsful iniquity which has

taken poſſeſſion of the world. A whole nation, deſtitute of only a few ſuch men, may periſh at a time when wiſdom is more wanted than ſtrength.

It is one of the known meaſures of divine adminiſtration, to leave both nations and individuals, obſtinately ſinful, to their own counſel, as the means of puniſhing them by their own hands. We have an inſtance in ſcripture of a national revolt accompliſhed, by placing the inſtruments of divine vengeance in this very ſtate of dereliction.

When it was determined by the ſupreme governor of the Jewiſh ſtate, to puniſh the apoſtacy of SOLOMON, by ſeparating ten of the tribes from the government of his deſcendants, the infatuated conduct of REHOBOAM, and the fury it excited, brought about, without a miracle, as ſignal a revolution as any we meet with in hiſtory.

The wiſe maxims of Solomon's better days, though not perhaps yet collected in a body, muſt have been recent and familiar to all the tribes of Iſrael. But when the nation was exaſperated at the anſwer they had received from Rehoboam, it is obſervable, that there was either not a man to recal to their minds the words of my text, or his moderation was overpowered by the general cry, "TO YOUR TENTS, O ISRAEL!"

Such a friend to his country might have ſuſpended a reſolution, juſtly provoked indeed, but pregnant with apparent miſchief to themſelves and poſterity. Something might have been urged in extenuation of an anſwer, which was ill adviſed; and, from the expreſſion of it in the moſt extravagant flight of figurative language, appeared to be the reſult of mere paſſion. It might have been pleaded, that they ought in prudence to wait for ſome actual outrage; that they might and ought to reſiſt, if he perſevered; but that, in the mean time, "THE BEGINNING OF STRIFE IS AS WHEN "ONE LETTETH OUT WATER."

Some ſuch advice as this might have diſpirited Jeroboam's party, but the divine purpoſe prevented it, by leaving the revolt to be carried on by men enraged, following the natural impulſe of their provocation. The people became abruptly as wild as their Prince, and being either deſtitute of better counſel, or deaf to it, became the proper inſtruments of God's vengeance upon the ingratitude of Solomon.

So here was a deciſive judgment, to the diſcredit of civil commotions; for it is evident from the hiſtory, that the fitteſt inſtruments of public confuſion were deemed to be bodies of men acting without reflexion, without advice, incited and united merely by the irrational motives of anger, hatred, malice, or, at the beſt, blind party-zeal.

In applying obſervations of this ſort to the laſt century, we are not called upon to decide the queſtions then agitated. We are directed, by the appointment of this day, to look back with horror at the guilt we commemorate, which may be done without entering into the allegations of either ſide. The tragedy before us was not the concluſion of an argument. It was the conſummation of civil fury. The unfortunate King could not be intended to be brought, in all ſubſequent ages, before another incompetent tribunal, by a ſolemn anniverſary diſcuſſion of his cauſe. Indeed, this ſeems to have been prevented, by a reſolution, laid down by the legiſlature as a fundamental principle of the conſtitution, declaring the perſon of the king ſacred, and that reſolution ſeems to be the baſis of the inſtitution of this day. It would be a ſolemn mockery of God, to continue the obſervation of the day, if the avowed murder of a ſovereign prince, in cold blood, were the known privilege of his ſubjects.

So that his perſon being conſtitutionally exempt from all violence, except only the mere accidents of a day of battle; we have before us, in his caſe, a melancholy inſtance of the improvement of iniquity, by long practice; by familiarity with blood; by habitual contempt of the reſtraints which have ſometimes kept back the worſt men from a new and horrible crime; by ſubſtituting, in the room of a ſenſe of moral duty, notions of political neceſſity, as of equal obligation; by trampling under foot thoſe forms of juſtice, which

had ſubſiſted from the earlieſt periods of our hiſtory; and, rather than not perpetrate the moſt atrocious of all acts, erecting a tribunal quite unknown, and, to the honour of the ſuffering prince, not ſubmitted to by him.

I mentioned before, that we are not bound, by the appointment of this day, to argue the merits of the caſe. We are required ſingly to direct our view to the crying ſin before us. But it unfortunately happens, that we are not permitted to indulge unmoleſted the patriotic grief, ariſing in good minds from a retroſpect to the national diſgrace, this day incurred. There are thoſe, who conſider the matter differently, and at this diſtance of time, when few are prepared to anſwer them, diſturb the devout obſervers of this day with a flat contradiction to the grounds of the inſtitution of it; aſſerting repeatedly, that the whole tranſaction was unexceptionably juſt.

I will not preſume to detain this audience with diſcuſſing a matter decided ſo long ago; but muſt beg leave to obſerve briefly, that to make the act of this day unexceptionably juſt, it ſeems neceſſary, that the character of the Royal Sufferer ſhould have been remarkably obnoxious;—that his guilt ſhould be indiſputably clear;—that his enemies ſhould be honourably poſſeſſed of his perſon, and that he ſhould be tried in the forms of the conſtitution which he was ſaid to have violated.

Now in each of theſe reſpects the whole tranſaction was notoriouſly defective.

His character was known to be excellent, and has been tranſmitted to us, by the beſt authorities, as exemplary in a high degree.

His guilt could not be indiſputably clear, for we have no legal evidence of ANY. The trial being a mere mockery of juſtice, nothing more can be concluded againſt him from thence, than that his life was an obſtacle to the further views of his perſecutors. Perhaps it might have been ſpared, had the nation in general been diſpoſed at that time to acknowledge any ſupreme but him. This being more than their ſucceſs warranted them to expect, they thought it expedient, that he ſhould die, and invented a murder, which might inſpire general terror, by operating as a defiance of law, juſtice, and humanity.

They could not well plead, that they were fairly poſſeſſed of his perſon. We know, that he did not fall into their hands by the mere chance of war. If that ſhould be alleged, then they were confeſſedly guilty of a violation of the laws of war, known only among ſavage nations for many centuries paſt.

The incompetency of the court by which he was tried, which alone was ſufficient to vitiate all their proceedings, is ſo clear, that it would be loſs of time to inſiſt upon it.

And thus this pretended act of juſtice, all theſe exceptions to it conſidered, is left to labour under its true deſcription, of the moſt flagrant injuſtice and inhumanity, unworthy of Engliſhmen, of ſoldiers, of good citizens, and of ſerious chriſtians.

It aſtoniſhed all Europe, as a fact incredible; it put an end to the life of a King, who ſhewed by his death, how well he deſerved to live; it ſent his family into exile, where they actually and largely imbibed the obnoxious principles of religion and government imputed to him, and became unfit to fill his throne; and it ſuſpended for a ſeaſon a conſtitution, which was happily too vigorous to be for ever aboliſhed by the moſt daring violence.

A guilt of this horrible magnitude, with all its circumſtances new in the hiſtory of mankind, was the produce of a long CIVIL WAR, and ſo became a ſtriking admonition to all poſterity, that, however dreadful other public calamities may be, there is none, except eſtabliſhed tyranny, ſo dreadful, as that confuſion of crimes, vices, ill humours, rapacious violences, and diabolical deſigns, which conſtitute a civil war.

May we of the preſent reign, enjoying every bleſſing ſociety can give, and moſt of them ſuch as that generation had not the leaſt ground to hope for, retain ſuch a ſenſe of our happineſs, as may ſecure us, to as diſtant a period as national happineſs can reach, from all danger of thoſe complicated miſeries, attendant upon a people ſeparated from their God, at hoſtile variance with their king, weary of the conſtitution of their government, and raſhly ſporting away their civil and domeſtic happineſs!

FINIS.